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Freckled Max and the Spooks

by

Walter Chaw

Juraj Jakubisko's career is a microcosm of the twentieth century tumult of his homeland. Born in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, he spent most of his life in Prague, now the Czech Republic, where he studied and remained until he passed away. He rose with the Czechoslovak New Wave and was banned for a decade from making features for his cheekiness in the face of totalitarianism, only to start up again upon his "release" with a series of kid-friendly fairytales that leaned heavy into the very human desire to live free of oppression and prejudice. Pointedly, both *The Feather Fairy* (*Perinbaba*, 1985) and *Freckled Max and the Spooks* (*Pehavý Max a strašidlá*, 1987) are about lost time, or time suspended, and being brought back from the dead, resurrected into a modern era as both naïf and walking cautionary tale. When Jakubisko died in 2023 at the age of 84, Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová remembered him as an artist whose work formed a part of the very fabric of the country's popular culture - a man called "The Fellini of the East" by critics enamored by his liquid use of magical realism, but one whom I'd compare more comfortably in that respect to Polish surrealist firebrand Andrzej Żuławski. His stories, and his story, are ones of perseverance through the inevitable cycles of peace and upheaval in our lives: the thread on a loom spinning into infinity. Now a hero, now a pariah, then a hero again and through it all this constant ideation of storyteller as chronicler of the history of his people and prophet of their destinies. Whatever lightness there may be to some of his work is offset by an underbelly of darkness that anchors them to the bottom of these black oceans: what has happened once will happen again, Jakubisko says, and then there are the countrymen to sing songs about the terrible briefness of the day, the sunset of the past, and the dawn of the future.

There are multiple candidates for Jakubisko's masterpiece, but for me that honor falls to either *The Deserters and the Nomads* (*Zbehovia a pútnici*, 1968) or his anarchic *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (*Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni*, 1969) - both told in a roughly tripartite structure and both dealing with the atrocity of war and the denial of the same by its victims. His legacy will be these films in particular, these and another handful of his films (the delicate, insular *Crucial Years* (1967), the sprawling *The Millennial Bee* (1983) and the devastating *Sitting on a Branch, Enjoying Myself* (1989)) that are all-time classics of the world cinema whether or not the world cinema knows it, yet. But more generally, Jakubisko will be remembered for the variety of his films, for his insouciant sex comedies that touch on Buñuel and Rohmer, for his historical epics like *Bathory* (2008) and his ambitious-to-the-point-of-experimental, socially-conscious fantasies like *An Ambiguous Report About the End of the World* (1997) - and yes, for his pair of family projects that, for their occasional bawdiness and that undercurrent of bleakness, may not be entirely just for kids after all. If you do it right, they never are. All of his films are marked by a refusal to adhere to rules, a thread of rebellion that might have something to do with the occasional banning of his films (*Birds, Orphans and Fools* was immediately yanked by Communist censors and suppressed for decades) and his run-ins with censorious regimes. All of them are marked, too, by a certain looseness around the borders between reality and dreaming. How better than to express how the constant flux of war and occupation perverts a culture's existential understanding of the world? For Jakubisko, we are built on unstable foundations. How could we expect the world we raise on it to be stable?

The Deserters and the Nomads is three aftermaths, set in the stunned silences after WWI, WWII and a post-apocalyptic, nuclear WWIII. Death is a major player in the film, a literal character (and not the only time in Jakubisko) who drifts through, drunk and eventually manic, on the bounty these wars have provided for him. In the end, posed with a sickle, he cackles in the green radioactive fallout of a dead world, accompanied by a beautiful young woman longing to see a sky that doesn't exist anymore. Shot in different styles, defiantly non-linear in its narrative, the film feels like a kaleidoscope of portraits of the dead - a possible headwater for Żuławski's *On A Silver Globe* (produced ten years later though not finished until 1988), another picture from a traumatized country (Poland) whose production was interrupted for ten years by a strict regime unamused by its artists creating works openly critical of bureaucracy, censorship, fascism and the shriveling consequences of occupation. In *Birds, Orphans and Fools*, a close analogue to countrywoman Věra Chytilová's effervescent *Daisies*, a trio of young adults each orphaned by political violence run amok in a bombed out church, take on a diseased philosophy of extreme optimism and cheer at odds with their dire situation. They are anarchists and their weapon against encroaching night is non-compliance. Bartlebys born of London Bridges fallen down. The script very loosely follows Ernst Lubitsch's *Design for Living.* They form a love triangle and in the middle of it the literarily-named Yorick (Jiří Sýkora) gets himself locked up for a year for his crimes of provocation of authority. While he's away, Marta (Magda Vášáryová) starts up a romance with shy Andrej (Phillippe Avron), causing friction upon Yorick's return and a disintegration of the tenuous bubble of romantic surreality they've maintained, pregnant, like the surface tension of brackish water. It reminds me, too, of the great Jiří Weiss' *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* that swallows up all the dreams and plans of its young protagonists in the Czechoslovak government in exile's "Operation Anthropoid." How cruel that their government's fight to ostensibly restore order results in just further disruption to their little lives that, for a period of a couple hours, are our entire world. I think of the line in *Casablanca* about little people and hills of beans and how so much of the Czechoslovak New Wave took that as the coldest of possible ironies and also their *raison d'être*.

It makes sense then, that after 1979, when Jakubisko's ten year term doomed to exclusively making state-supervised television documentaries to satisfy the Communist's wrath over *Birds, Orphans and Fools* was finished, he chose to focus in on sex comedies and children. Before that, though, technically his first film post-exile is *The Millennial Bee* (1983), based on a novel by Peter Jaroš and covering multiple generations of three siblings' lives as they and their children enact the moral and traditional decay of their country around, and in many ways through, their choices. Starting life as a nearly-four-hour, four-part television miniseries, such was its peculiar power and popularity - and possibly the thrill of its free association between genres - that it was cut into a three-hour theatrical release in 1984. The sister's, Kristína's (Eva Jakoubková) story is the most salacious of the three, involving her engaged in an adulterous *menage a trois* with an unhappily married couple, eventually birthing a child to be raised by the three of them. Yet I don't think Jakubisko's intent is exploitation. He's interested in establishing the matriarchal, socialist society of honeybees as a vehicle for transcendental, often pompous, truths unearthed by hero Martin (Jozef Kroner) in his obsession with his carefully-cultivated apiaries. He lapses occasionally into fugues in which a giant queen bee conflates the fate of the Slovak state with her hive of enslaved workers and largely useless drones. She is the manifestation of the Communist state, the motherland, and Jakubisko's adaptation of good Communist Party Member Jaroš's novel must have been seen as something like a capitulation. It's not. Consider the shower of frogs that touches on Christian mythology; the card game inside a whale that does the same while incorporating the folk traditions of other, neighbor cultures. Consider how Jakubisko is gently rejecting the notion that his countrymen are blameless in their own subjugation and that this sprawling, unruly piece is in fact a flaunting of the new at odds with the entrenched.

He makes *The Feather Fairy* next with Fellini's wife and muse Giulietta Masina as the Brothers Grimm's Mother Hulda. Masina's casting is not only a sly nod to his nickname ("Fellini of the East"), but a stroke of genius for an artist looking to marry the tradition of Italy's post-war cinema with his own post-Cold War contributions. Children and folktales seem to have about them a cultural safety net during this period, a protection

against Socialist Realism to some extent because one could always claim cultural importance in these tales for an imagined demographic of simple proletariat. Masina is Perinbaba, a.k.a. Mrs. Winter, an omniscient being who takes on the job of raising an orphaned child, Jakub (Tobias Hoesl) who survives an avalanche and exists now as her mortal companion, gifted immortality at the cost of connection to the human world. I'm reminded of the Eros and Psyche myth - particularly when Jakub falls in love with a mortal, Alžbetka (Vančíková). This brings Jakub under the umbra of Perinbaba's sister, Stará Zubatá (Valerie Kaplanová), the embodiment of Death. He, in other words, begins to age. The push/pull for Jakub's life between the two sisters forms the spine of the film and its prologue too, set in a circus caravan trudging through the snow to the next show, when Perinbaba and Stará Zubatá disagree that death should claim the entire company. (We'll meet another traveling circus, another orphan, and another accidental caretaker in Jakubisko's next project, a television show based on Allan Rune Pettersson's Frankenstein's Aunt.) It's not hard to see Jakubisko as Jakub, held in a state of suspended animation and freed now to shout his love at the heart of the world, even though ten years of his creative life had been drained from him in a historical instant.

His next project is *Freckled Max and the Spooks* (*Pehavý Max a strašidlá*). Based on a television serial that, like *The Millennial Bee* was re-edited for theatrical release, it follows the titular ginger orphan Max (Martin Hrebeň) as he escapes from his abusive foster parents, performers in a traveling carnival, and falls into the protection of the mysterious, amphibious creature Alojz (Eddie Constantine). They retire to Castle Frankenstein where the good doctor (Boleslav Polívka) is engaged in the creation of his latest monster, Albert (Gerhardt Karzel). Intending per usual to gift his charge with a genius' brain, he's thwarted this time when gaffed Igor (Jacques Herlin) brings him a suitable brain but frozen solid. Albert, outfitted with thawed but damaged brain, awakens as a good-natured lunk, ogling anatomy books and wondering about the miracle of women and why he doesn't have one. Count Dracula (Ferdy Mayne) lives at the castle, too, having rigged a Goldbergian contraption that opens his lid automatically at sundown. The Count doesn't have much patience for the affable Albert, but along with various spooks, a possible werewolf, and other Universal cameos, Albert learns enough charm to

woo the comely Klára (Barbara De Rossi) and earn the trust of a mob of villagers threatening constantly to lynch him. Chopped into roughly-chronological vignettes in a way very much like the rough assembly of a reanimated monster, and presented in a style that is at once slapstick and vaguely horrific, it would be a mistake to treat *Freckled Max* as a coherent narrative rather than a serial piece in which each of the major misfit character receives, in turn, Max's attentions and intentions for them to find happiness and belonging. In a world balkanized by hysterical superstitions, fear of the Other, and the constant threat of an easily mislead and radicalized population, it's up to the very young or the very naïve, Jakubisko suggests, to break us out of the rut of bigotry and the nationalism that allows, indeed valorizes, desensitized, impersonal mass murder.

I love Albert's first few moments of life. I love the steampunk kites Igor flies to gather the requisite electricity, and I love how his first transgression is shaking his creator's hand a little too hard. He needs to be taught by the unfeeling populace the sensations of fear and alienation. For their part, the villagers center their animus for all the hardships of their lives around the goings on at the Castle which has fallen into terrible disrepair and its immigrant, indeed Bavarian inhabitants. "We should sell it to the government," says Igor, and through this there is a small glimpse into the state of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s as its infrastructure rots and the powers that be seek to nationalize personal possessions. Frankenstein's Aunt (Viveca Lindfors) insists on refurbishing the family reserve and so enlists all the creatures in this monster's party to lend their special powers to the reclamation project. Universal Studios itself was not adverse throughout the forties to creating team-ups between its properties, nor in messing with genres that expanded its audience but threatened at times to make their monsters into wise-cracking comedians and other varieties of stooge. It's the kind of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* that eventually drove Boris Karloff to the arms of RKO and Val Lewton. What *Freckled Max* is, then, is not so much a send-up of the James Whale and Tod Browning films that established the monster canon, but the post-war knock-offs that no longer saw the monsters as representative of the tetchy period between wars and the rise of fascism in the United States and abroad, but instead the vanquishing and trivializing of monsters in the afterglow of WWII's series of unconditional surrenders by "the bad guys." The ironies embedded in Jakubisko purporting to make anything that would declare a period of genocidal evil effectively "over" litters this picture like bread crumbs leading in and out of the deepest tangles of a still-smoldering Hürtgen Forest.

Start with how Max doesn't have a surname, robbed of it by the facts of his parentage and failed adoption. He has, through circumstance, been denied heritage and ancestry. The suggestion is that the savior of all of us will come from among the working class, the impoverished, the ignored and reviled. But Jakubisko also spares a kind thought for the aristocracy: Igor who suffers from the curse of shame-inspired insomnia and his love for Lady Bathory (Mercedes Sampietro) whose crimes of sanguineous vanity, another creature of stolen time, the director will explore fully, and

gorily, in time. The couple have, in their sordid past, given up their child for uncertain reasons and now they're doomed to exist in stasis until a child without parents frees them. Max vows to be that kid. Consider Sepp (Tilo Pruckner), an infernal being dressed as a fireman who is able to crouch in ovens and spark fires with his hands who, if I didn't know better, seems to be a creature created from incendiary munitions and the rubble of bombed out buildings. Much of *Freckled Max* is involved in the broken and the abandoned helping one another through touch and breath. Klára brings down Albert's temperature by lightly blowing on him; and he's helped through various walls and travails by people grasping his hands and caressing his face, ignoring his monstrous appearance and lack of coordination. As time runs down, Max is reunited with the carnival as a voiceover assures that he will now be treated as a star for the magic he learned at Frankenstein's Castle. Obviously a way to end a piece designed never to end, the question that lingers for me is this idea of how he doesn't really learn magic from Frankenstein, Frankenstein is after all a scientist, but that he has essentially taken the tenets of science back to the snake oil midway salesmen and other performers and hucksters on a mission to spread knowledge across a place in the process of reconstruction.

Freckled Max feels like a Sid and Marty Krofft production - a sort of *Sigmund & the Sea Monsters* with its own red-headed, freckled protagonist who finds himself washed up on a magic beach aswarm with creepy crawlies in need of weekly assistance for a variety of wacky adventures. This grounding in a child, a literal "red-headed step child" rejected by all but the outcast community of their respective shows, forces the audience to connect to the only "normal" avatar in a company of "freaks." Jakubisko would have been sensitive to his countrymen devastated and made strange by war, might have seen them as synecdoche for all of the people of Czechoslovaki, and would have been drawn to this material as a way to speak about what he saw as his country's liminal position eternally suspended between strong men and strife. That's the immense satirical power of the Czechoslovak New Wave and its parade of masters and still-undiscovered masterpieces, centered here in pieces oneiric, uncanny, surreal, even avant-garde and experimental. Each of them, arguably, in some way related to the feeling that a new storm is constantly on the verge of breaking before even the last one has finished spending itself. For Jakubisko to be considered by his own countrymen to have a finger to the pulse of their nation's heartbeat speaks to the extent to which his films set a sometimes peculiar, always insistent example of creating a legacy even as iron curtains are coming down.

Finally, *Freckled Max* also reminds me a lot of James D. Parriott's 1982 TV series *Voyagers!* in which a muscle-headed Phineas Bogg (Jon-Erik Hexum), a member of a society of time travelers, finds himself partnered with orphan Jeffrey Jones (Meeno Peluce) in his mission to fix various timelines in which history has gone wrong. Jeffrey is a history savant, you see, having learned at the knee of his dead history professor father. In this way, he's like Jakubisko's heroes: Bradburian relics who carry with them pieces of a culture that refuses to crush under assorted jackboots. I adored this show and its combination of broad action and humor with little bits and pieces of histories I had failed to learn in school. *Voyagers!* was canceled after one season. In my mind, though the incidents were unrelated, I conflated the cancellation of the show with the accidental death of Hexum who, bored between shots on the set of his next series, *Cover Up*, placed a gun firing blanks to his temple in a burlesque of Russian Roulette and fired on a loaded chamber. The force of the expelled

gas was enough to kill him. Revisiting *Voyagers!* and the feature film re-edited from its pilot and one episode, has always carried with it for me this sense of incredible sadness and waste. I felt that way again with *Freckled Max* whose textures have about them the same feeling of invention and peril, the same richness of text that weaves fantasy with the past and the importance of knowledge, and finally the same weight of melancholy over the cost of human isolation and loneliness. War makes orphans, literal and philosophical. It's all it does well. As with any auteur, it's best appreciated as part of the long story of Jakubisko's entire body of work. *Freckled Max* feels like a lark, in other words, until you consider this is the same man who made *Birds, Orphans and Fools* and suddenly, the shape of a larger tapestry stirs and revives. That, right there, is the magic.

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STITCHED TOGETHER FROM PIECES OF THE DEAD

An Autopsy of Freckled Max and the Spooks

by

Steven Peros

I knew literally nothing about 1987's *Freckled Max and the Spooks* when Deaf Crocodile kindly asked me if I would like to write an essay for inclusion in this impeccable presentation. This was not surprising since Deaf Croc has a delightfully annoying habit of introducing seemingly every cineaste on the planet to some memorable work of international genre filmmaking of which they had heretofore never heard. Rather than research the film prior to viewing, I decided to let it flow over me as it might flow over its intended audience in 1987, quite evidently children, and then dig into its backstory afterward.

Although its zipper-skulled Frankenstein's Monster slightly recalls Peter Boyle's *Young Frankenstein* (1974), and while its child's eye take on friendly classic monsters brings to mind Fred Dekker's *The Monster Squad* (seemingly in production simultaneously), I found *Freckled Max*'s scale and humor reminding me more of the lesser known, small screen *Monster Squad* — a live action Saturday morning kids' show that ran for one season in the U.S. on NBC in 1976. The simple premise of that clunkily charming half-hour comedy had Fred Grandy (later of TV's *The Love Boat*, then U.S. congressman) playing a crime-studying nightwatchman who fights wrong-doers each week with the aid of the wax figures of three famous monsters which he has brought back to life: Count Dracula (Henry Polic II), Frank N. Stein (Mike Lane, who had played the Monster in *Frankenstein 1970*

with Boris Karloff), and werewolf Bruce W. Wolf (5' 3" pro wrestler, Buck Kartalian, so memorable as Julius in *Planet of the Apes*). In short, *Freckled Max and the Spooks* felt like I was watching a TV show made for kids who love monster movies.

Imagine my non-surprise when I learned immediately afterward that the 97-minute movie I had just watched was adapted from a seven-episode Czechoslovak TV miniseries entitled, *Frankenstein's Aunt* (*Frankensteins Tante*), based on a 1978 Swedish children's book, "Frankenstein's faster" by Allan Rune Pettersson. "Faster" translates to aunt on one's father's side, while "Moster" would be one's aunt on their mother's side, making the title's pun-cum-alliteration unappreciable in any language other than its native Swedish.

Burlesquing classic gothic monsters for the amusement of adults and children was not something new. It began less than twenty years after Universal's *Dracula* burst on the screen on Valentine's Day 1931. It was a massive success and brought about *Frankenstein* from the same studio within the same year. The horror film craze of the 1930's found great resistance from censors in the U.S. and U.K. While Universal churned out Wolf Man, Frankenstein, and Mummy movies all throughout World War 2, when the war ended, period gothic horror seemed not only quaint, but tame and irrelevant compared to the horrors of war. They were a thing of the past.

1945's *House of Dracula* was Universal's last "straight gothic horror", but three years later, the same monstrous trio featured in that film (Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Wolf Man) appeared in 1948's comedy, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. It was a hit, but put the nail in the coffin for serious gothic monster movies. More monster movie parodies followed into the 1950's, not only from Universal — who pitted Abbott and Costello against the Invisible Man, the Mummy, and Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde in three separate films — but also at other studios, with other comedy teams, like *The Bowery Boys Meet the Monsters* (1954) and Martin & Lewis in *Scared Stiff* (1955)

Hammer Films in London smelled a void (yes, the savvy studio executive can sometimes smell the beckoning aroma of absence) and re-introduced audiences to Frankenstein's Monster, this time in luscious Technicolor with blood and more blood. The resultant *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) was as much a sensation as *Dracula* was in 1931 and launched Christopher Lee into international stardom in the same way Bela Lugosi was launched via the blood thirsty count.

But even Hammer fell prey to the modern horror films of the late 1960's and early 1970's (*Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist*, et al), so they shifted their brand to less gothic horrors. Their final period gothic monster movie was 1974's *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* with an aging but still spry Peter Cushing essaying the mad doctor and David Prowse filling out the hairy monster costume, three years prior to donning Darth Vader's mask and cloak. That same year, Mel Brooks threw around his considerable box office weight to mount *Young Frankenstein*, his and Gene Wilder's co-written spoof of Universal monster movies, shot in black and white no less. It was an enormous hit and once again made it difficult for anyone to mount a serious gothic monster movie.

Universal tried to bring back the genre by having Frank Langella recreate his sensational, sexy Broadway Dracula on the big screen. But exactly three months prior to its 1979 release, comedy-horror beat it to theaters when George Hamilton spoofed the count in *Love at First Bite*. Apparently, audiences preferred Richard Benjamin's Van Helsing to Laurence Olivier's.

After 1978's *Halloween* and 1980's *Friday the 13th*, contemporary, youth-driven slasher films were the monster films du jour. No studio dared utter such obsolete words as Frankenstein or Dracula. Werewolves, however, had their day in the moon in 1981 with both *The Howling* and *American Werewolf in London*, but even those two present-day films ladled on the comedy pretty heavily. That same year, Roger Corman's New World Pictures tried to use tuxedoed Gothic vampires and bats to spoof modern

slasher movies with *Saturday the 14th*, the results were neither funny nor successful.

Since 1974, with the exception of the *Hotel Transylvania* animated series of features, gothic horror comedy has not had a success on a par with *Abbott and Costello Meets Frankenstein* or *Young Frankenstein*. The aforementioned *The Monster Squad* (1987) is a delightful film and has earned a cult reputation, but was a financial flop upon initial release. All of which sets the stage for what global audiences were thinking in 1987 when creatures such as Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster were mentioned. Quaint, silly, nothing to take seriously. But the risk was worth it because these were also globally known characters and in the public domain, thus, could be used free of charge. Only the makeup design was copyright-protected by the corresponding studio, but not the characters themselves. It made sense that these monsters were now the stuff of successful children's fantasy fiction like Sweden's *Frankenstein's Aunt*. These were no longer the creatures of nightmares but of fairy tales and daydreams, and that's what director Juraj Jakubisko recognized instantly in his adaptation for television, co-written with Jaroslav Dietl, Joachim Hammann, and Jozef Paštéka.

Jakubisko is arguably the brightest directorial star amongst Slovak film directors. Starting out as a photographer, he shifted gears to film directing at age 22, attending film school in Prague. His student works were celebrated but it was his 1983 epic, *The Millennial Bee*, that cemented his place in history when it became Czechoslovakia's official entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards. Its portrait of a humble family struggling through the years leading up to World War I was a huge financial success and has been hailed as the best Czechoslovak film of the 1980's by many film critics.

This was followed by a 1985 children's film, *The Feather Fairy (Perinbaba)*, a Grimm's fairy tale adaptation starring Giulietta Masina, wife of Jakubis friend and mentor Federico Fellini, who persuaded Masina to take the role. It was undoubtedly the success of this fairy tale that led to his being asked to helm the development and direction of the TV series, *Frankenstein's Aunt*.

Pettersson's novel centered on Hannah, the controlling aunt of Dr. Frankenstein, and involved three classic monsters: Count Dracula, the Wolfman (even sporting the same character name as Universal's Wolf Man: Larry Talbot), and Frankenstein's Monster, of course. According to Jakubisko, the producers of the seven-country co-production (Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Sweden, Italy Spain) insisted that the TV series adaptation incorporate more monsters from different cultures for its intended global audience. As a result, along with the three aforementioned monsters featured in the book (Werewolf "Talbot" would be re-christened "Librarian," presumably due to copyright issues with Universal's Talbot Wolf Man), Jakubisko and his writing team added Alojz, a Mer-man (male mermaid), a ghost called "The White Lady" (loosely inspired by 16th Century serial killer, Elizabeth Báthory), and finally a ghostly knight by the name of Count Theodor. In fact, ghosts - rather than monsters - become the most emotionally resonant and poetic element of *Freckled Max*. This is a house of ghosts, a house of loss, a house of regret. True, the spine of the film is a sweet, childlike story of the Frankenstein Monster finding a "normal" girlfriend, but the real meat on those bones is the lonely, elderly and kind vampire count who flies off every night, ostensibly to feast on the blood of unseen extras in the next village. It is the professed sorrow of Dr. Frankenstein's assistant Igor, utilized 95% of the time for comic relief (not unlike Marty Feldman's Eye-gor), but who professes his dead-serious profound regret for unspeakable past actions in one of the film's most surprisingly intimate moments. It is the unexpected, yet touching, mournful romance between Igor and The White Lady which comes to fruition in the final reel.

Like a novel unfolding within a child's daydream, the story establishes a set of characters only to pivot to another character's story, then pivot again. For example, we begin with a compelling fairytale opening of young orphan, Max (a charming, natural Martin Hrebeň), escaping the abusive bondage of his circus sideshow servitude thanks to the magical efforts of a Mer-Man, Alojz, who is played so affectingly by 74-year-old Eddie Constantine, his beneficent features, kind smile, and focused yet gentle gaze suggesting a charming "Boy & His Monster" adventure to follow. Very soon after, the pair arrive at the castle laboratory of Dr. Henry Frankenstein (the forename via Universal Pictures, not Mary Shelley), who is in the midst of his comical attempt to keep a brilliant, deceased scientist alive by placing his brain into the head of a creature he has just created from dead bodies. Sporting a deliberately zany mad scientist hairdo, Bolek Polívka as Henry is in slapsticky creation mode with the game but incompetent Igor (Jacques Herlin, alternately clownish and heartbreaking) having mistaken "keep the brain cold" with literally putting it in a freezer. With no other choice, Henry puts the frozen-solid brain, swirling with dry ice, into the zipper-skulled head of the Monster, played by 6'4" Gerhard Karzel, making his screen debut. Upon coming to life, the friendly, childlike Monster (who nevertheless does not know his own strength) is christened "Albert" for the scientist whose brain he now houses.

Soon after shifting the viewer's focus from Max & Alojz to Henry, the mad doctor leaves the castle to avoid the arrival of his interfering Aunt Hannah, played by Viveca Lindfors, whose character's cigar-smoking was the actress's idea, whether Jakubisko liked it or not (Lindfors and the director reportedly did not get along). Hannah would like to see her nephew married. At this point, all of the disparate threads of the ensemble storylines merge into a central tale: that of Albert charmingly discovering his attraction to women via book illustrations and setting out to find a mate with the aid of Max, Igor, and Count Dracula (who has to fight his own impulses to bite Albert's intended on the neck). The count is played with all the gravitas of immortality by horror veteran Ferdy Mayne, who had played a Dracula-inspired vampire count twenty years earlier in Roman Polanski's horror-comedy, *The Fearless Vampire Killers.*

Werewolf Librarian (Flavio Bucci) skirts the periphery of the movie as a mysterious man with big sideburns (like David Selby as Quentin Collins in TV's gothic soap opera, *Dark Shadows*), never transforming into a wolf man (at least not in the feature version). True to the logic of a child's dream, further new fairy tale characters pop up and surprise us in the final act, such as Count Theodor, the ghost of a knight, who is determined to stop the romance between Igor and the white witch. All the while, Albert's pursuit of the lovely Klára (Barbara de Rossi) finds its way to the altar.

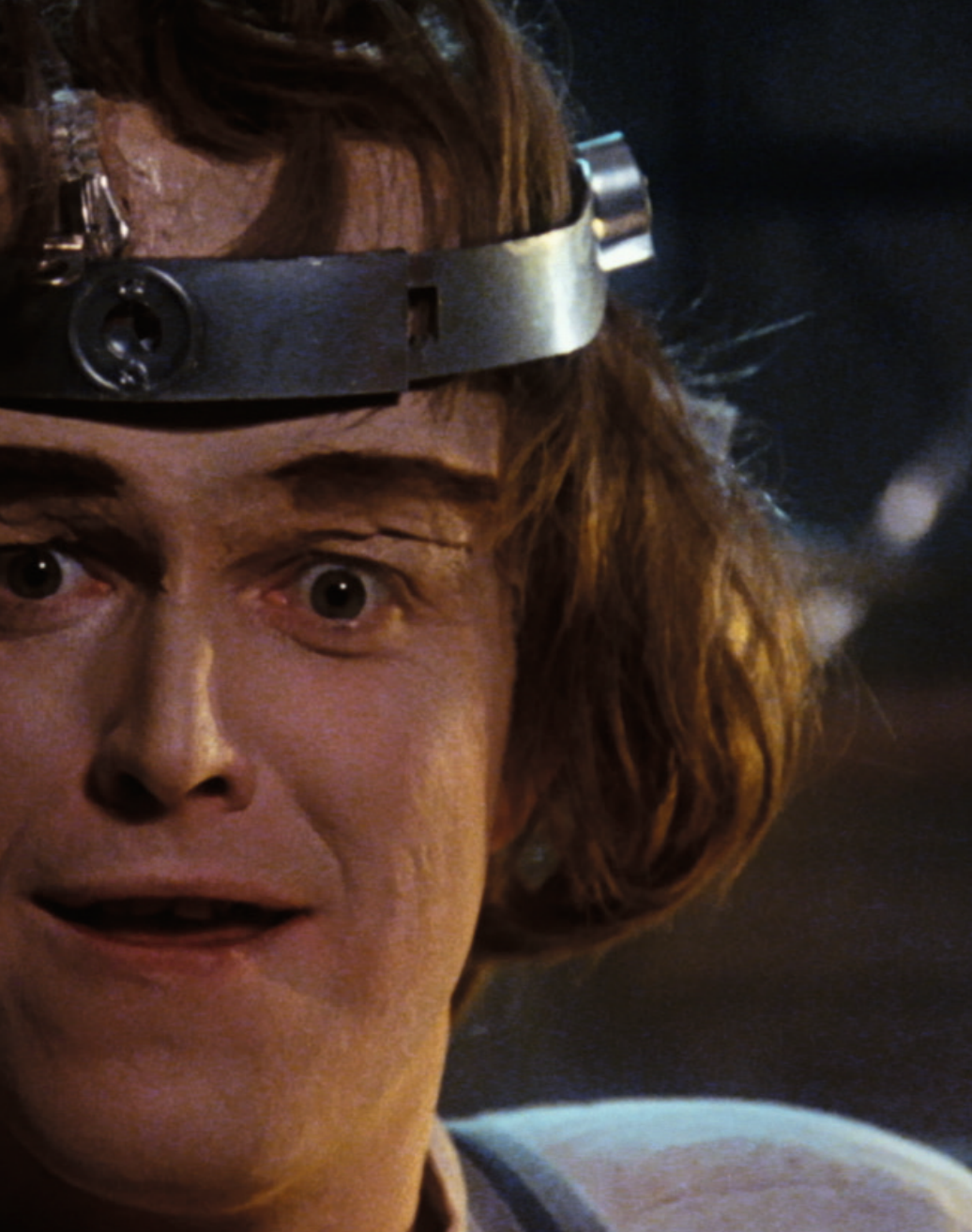
This sort of structure —shifting focus from character to character — is typical of a serialized TV mini series, where each character in the ensemble has a story line and often will "star" in one episode while being a supporting player in the next episode. However, it has a fascinating effect when the tale is delivered in a single dose, as if the viewer is flapping through the story with complete abandon like a vampire bat let loose in Castle Frankenstein, ducking into this room or that, this storyline or the other. All of this brings to mind another perhaps unintentional cinematic cousin: *Mad Monster Party* (1967), the Rankin-Bass stop-motion-animated monster rumble which was similarly multi-storied, centered around a single castle location, and also had a sweet love story between human and monster as its beating heart.

But darn it if ultimately *Freckled Max and the Spooks'* unholy charming experiment isn't uniquely satisfying. The location filming in the mountains, villages, lakes, and castles (both exteriors and interiors) of Austria transports us in ways Universal Pictures of the 1930's and 40's never could. And the casting of real European faces as the familiar, torch-bearing, angry mob, makes their outrage fresh and vibrant once again. The deliberately spare and rubbery makeup seems designed to replicate the children's book upon which it is based, not compete with the expert makeups of Universal's legendary Jack Pierce. Throughout, Jakubisko wisely realizes that *Freckled Max* must be its own thing and not try to compete with anything that came before.

Just as Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns were influenced by U.S. westerns, which were then counter-influenced by Leone's work, Jakubisko takes European gothic horror story roots, which had been realized by Hollywood in the 1930's and 40's, and then affectionately parodies Hollywood via a Slovak sensibility. It's the sort of glorious, ping-ponging, intercultural fusion that represents the perfect argument against such demonizing terms as "cultural appropriation" and replaces it with the humanist glory of artistic expression that is "cross-cultural pollination". In the final moments of the film, just as in the final episode of the series, all story elements come together and conclude. The film even circles back to Mer-Man Alojz's lovelorn obsession with the carved wooden mermaid that decorated the traveling circus from where Freckled Max had escaped in the film's opening. He gets his real live mermaid!

The fact that Max's story, too, comes full circle, returning the boy to the very center of trauma from which he had escaped but now with a renewed outlook and monster friends in tow, is perhaps the greatest tribute to the sort of European sensibilities one would never find in a Hollywood telling of this same story.

STEVEN PEROS is a screenwriter, playwright, comic book writer, and film journalist/historian whose writing on film has been published in *MovieMaker, Village Voice*, and *Huffington Post*. Along with providing numerous film commentary tracks, his cinema books include *H.M. Wynant: You Must Believe!*, *Giant Beast Cinema,* and *Cinema Bizarro.* He created the graphic novel series, *Stoker & Wells*, wrote the stage play and screenplay for Peter Bogdanovich's *The Cat's Meow*, sold TV pilots to NBC and MTV, and wrote screenplays for talent as varied as Dolly Parton and Jackie Chan. For more on Steven, or to contact him, please visit www.stevenperos.com.



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Notes on Film Restoration

Presented by the Slovak Film Institute. The film has been preserved within the framework of the Systematic Restoration of the Slovak Audiovisual Heritage Project. Digital restoration was carried out within the framework of the same project in 2009 in close cooperation with Ján Ďuriš, director of photography. Initial source material for digital restoration was an intermediate positive as the film itself is a theatrical version of a seven-episode TV miniseries, Frankenstein's Aunt. The material was scanned, retouched and colour-corrected in 2K. Film laboratory processes were supervised by Štefan Komorný. Digital processes were carried out under the supervision of Peter Csordás.

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